A Page of Short Stories

A LUCKY LEAP

SLOWLY the heavy train panted up the grade and as the red caboose came even with the tiny cottage beside the track, a lithe form swung itself off and dropped lightly to the right of way.

Ada Storning sprang forward to greet the man. "I didn't expect to see you until evening," she cried.

"This came special delivery," explained the new arrival, handing over the oblong package that clearly indicated its origin in a candy shop.

"Chocolates!" she cried. "George, you're a darling!"

"I know it," was the modest admission, as the clear gray eyes smiled down into the softer eyes of brown. "I know it, because you have told me so often—far more often than I deserve—and therefore it must be so."

"I haven't had any chocolates in —O! years and years," reminded Ada, unwrapping the box and extracting a bon bon. "It's so good just to see them again."

Until three years before, James Storning, Ada's father, had been train dispatcher of the L. V. & S. Then his wife had died after a prolonged illness and he was broken down.

The doctor had prescribed an open air life, entirely free from the confinements of the office, and the road had found a place for him as track walker on the mountain division, where the essentials of altitude and exercise were accompanied by a wage, small but sufficient to satisfy the needs of father and daughter.

James Storning was rapidly recovering his health, but for three years Ada had seen nothing of the world beyond the limits of Wounded Bear Pass. Every penny of her father's savings had been spent in the effort to save her mother's life, and there was no money for traveling, even with free transportation from the road.

Once a week the freight stopped and put off such things as the two needed in the way of food and clothing, and twice a month the pay train halted long enough for Storning to climb aboard and sign the receipt book.

Apart from that, visitors had been few until the tunnel gang had come six months before.

Originally the L. V. & S. had built along the lines of least resistence. Now the earnings of the road were being put into improvements.

Just above Wounded Bear Pass was a tunnel through the mountain, but on the eastern side of the road skirted the face of the cliff, picking its tortuous way around the peaks of the upper range. A second tunnel had been planned to cut off this detour, and George Adams had come to take charge of the construction gang.

They were working but a single shift, and Adams had fallen into the habit of jumping the west-bound freight to the Storning cottage, and spending the evening there, and making his way upgrade through the tunnel to the construction camp, unless the eastward freight happened to be late.

It had not been long before he had won a confession of love from Ada, and they had planned to marry when the work should be completed. George figured that by that time he should have saved enough for a home and the prompt construction of the tunnel would probably mean a better position with the road.

He had gone down to division headquarters to consult with the chief engineer, and had purchased a box of candy for Ada, little thinking how greatly she would appreciate the gift.

It was nearly dark when he at last reached the construction camp just below the gaping mouth of the new tunnel. Cassidy, his foreman, met him with a doleful face.

"Those greasers are at it again," he reported as Adams came up. "They had another one of them saints' days and I told 'em to keep on working and it would please the saint more than gettin' drunk. One of 'em tried to knife me, and they're all in executive session now tellin' each other what heretic devils we are. Sure I'm as good a churchman as them jabbering fools, and devil a saint's day can I remember that comes today."

"We will have to do the best we can for a few weeks," said Adams, pleadingly. "It's poor material at best, but if we get them sulky, we never shall have the tunnel done."

Adams hurried on to his own tent, past the lines of old freight cars used as homes for the Mexicans who formed the greater part of the construction gang.

There he was presently waited upon by a deputation who garrulously demanded the immediate dismissal of the Senor Cassidy, who had grossly insulted their religion and their saint.

Adams was worn out by his trip on the freights, and worried over his interview with the chief engineer. He expressed regret that their saint had been insulted, but told them that it would be better if they gave less heed to their numerous saints and more to the construction of the tunnel.

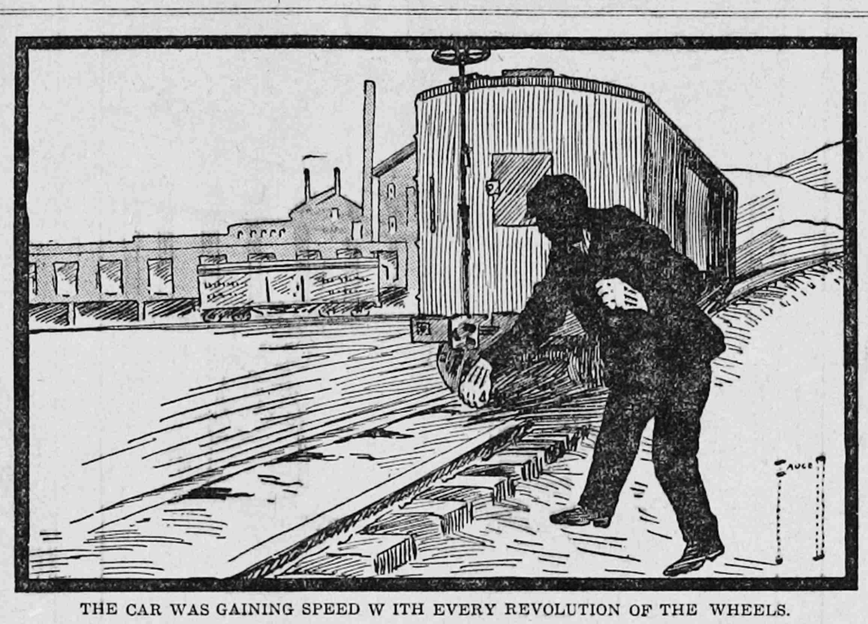
There had been saints' days innumerable, and it was on account of these delays that Adams had been called to consultation. He had been promised another gang in a few weeks, and it was the knowledge that presently he would not need them that led him to speak more severely than was his wont.

To the dismissal of Cassidy he flatly refused to listen and when they persisted he drove them from his tent.

The next morning not a man stirred when the whistle of the drill locomotive called to labor, and Adams was sullenly informed that the men would not labor under the Senor Cassidy.

It was a strike, and Adams knew from experience that there was little use to argue. Labor was scarce and it would be impossible to secure the services of the other gang for three weeks at the least.

He decided to walk down to the Storning cottage. Storning was an expert operator and Ada also knew the Morse. An instrument had been cut in on the train wire and over that he could reach the main office and ask advice.



THE CAR WAS GAINING SPEED W ITH EVERY REVOLUTION OF THE WHEELS.

He had gone half a mile when a shout from the construction camp caused him to return. A band of Mexicans were dancing about the track and the red car which had stood apart from the others was slowly moving onto the main line.

All night long the Mexican strikers had been drinking, and this was their way to avenge the insult put upon their saint.

There was more than a ton of dynamite in the car, together with fuse and fulminating caps. The road was down grade for some six miles. The eastbound passenger had probably left Geron, the nearest telegraph station, and was laboring up the grade with the dynamite car rushing toward it.

The car was moving slowly now, but was gaining with every revolution of the wheels. As it came toward him, Adams made up his mind and jumped for the ladder. It might be possible to set the brakes and bring the car to a stop or reduce the speed to a point where it could be slowed sufficiently to permit him to run ahead and throw the dumping switch just beyond the Storning cottage.

The dumping switch was used to get rid of the rock taken from the new tunnel. It curved sharply to the north and ran several hundred feet to a gulch, down which the cars were dumped.

It would probably be impossible to entirely check the car's momentum, but if it could be slowed down, he could run ahead and throw the switch in time to deflect the car from the main line. If he failed the overland was doomed.

The car had not moved since the construction work was tarted and the brake worked stiffly because of rust. Before much could be done the black mouth of the old tunnel gaped before him and Adams was forced to climb down the ladder to avoid being crushed by the roof of the tunnel.

As the lower mouth grew from a point to a patch of light that every instant gained in size, Adams looked anxiously ahead. If only Ada were at the door he could make her understand.

He breathed a prayer of thanksgiving as the car shot out of the tunnel and he caught sight of the girl standing in the doorway of the cottage.

Ada had just stepped to the doorway to look out, for the rumble from the tunnel had caught her attention. Adams sometimes sent down notes by the engineer, who took her replies on the return trip, and she thought that perhaps it was the worktrain.

It needed but a glance to tell her what the trouble was. How the dynamite car had run away she could not guess, it was enough that it was tearing down the grade toward the passenger train.

Even at the distance she could recognize Adams frantically working at the brake and she caught the meaning of his pantomime.

For a moment she hesitated. If she let the car get past, Adams would see the futility of further endeavor and jump before it was too late. If she turned the car onto the siding he must inevitably be killed in the explosion that she knew must follow the derailing.

But it was only for a second that she debated. Then she ran down the track to the switch and with the tears streaming from her eyes she threw it over.

Adams had succeeded in cutting down the speed of the car to an extent sufficient to keep it from climbing over the rails, but to do so he had had to stick to the car, and as it swept onto the siding there was time only for a glance as he waved goodby.

Ada sank to her knees and covered her eyes as the car sped onward to the dump. Then there came the dull detonation and the crash of rocks. It was all over.

Her father came rushing up the track at the sound of the explosion. Then half-leading, half-carrying Ada, he made his way to the end of the siding.

Some 60 feet below there was a gaping hole in the side of the cliff, but of the car itself there was no trace. It had been blown into a powder.

Storning peered over the edge and presently he was scrambling madly down the rocks. It was a nasty drop and Ada shivered as she followed.

About 40 feet below was a shelf of rock untouched by the explosion, and on this were standing her father and her sweetheart.

For the moment she could not believe that it was other than a fantasy, but Adams looked up and waved his hand and soon he began to scramble up the face of the cliff. His clothes were torn and covered with blood from innumerable scratches and his face was one mass of dirt, but Ada clasped him in her arms and rained kisses upon his lips.

"I thought I was sending you to your death," she sobbed. "It is all so wonderful."

"You have not heard the best part," he exclaimed. "When the car took the siding all right, I dropped off on the gravel bank. Beyond a few cuts I was not hurt. When the explosion came it dislodged the earth and I went sliding down hill to bring up on the ledge."

"It seems almost a miracle," said Ada, wonderingly.

"Wait for the biggest miracle," he interrupted. "When I got down there I found that the explosion had dug a hole in the cliff and uncovered as fine a vein of ore as you would want to see. I'm going down on the passenger this evening to file a mineral claim. I'll finish the tunnel and then I'll start in to work the claim, and your father can give up his exercise along the track and walk wherever he pleases. I've got enough money for development work and by the time she commences to show a profit we'll have a honeymoon that will take us so far East that we'll come back on the Dynamite Mine, from the westward."

"I didn't know that there was gold in this range," said Ada, wonderingly.

"You never can tell," reminded Adams. "I didn't know that you were here when I took the tunnel job. It's not often that a man finds wealth and happiness on the same location. Usually he gets the wealth and goes in search of happiness. I've made a double discovery on the same spot."

TOMMY'S JEALOUSY

TOMMY, in the manner of the masculine, was showing off. He charged snortingly about the oval of the drive, and up the steps, to cast himself, breathless but admiring at the feet of Miss Shelby, then to look adoringly up into her face until his small lungs regained their proper supply of atmosphere and he could tear off again.

"My, Tommy! How fast you can run."

Praise was sweet when bestowed by his own Miss Minnie, and he would have run his fat little legs off in the hot September sun had not Miss Minnie introduced a diversion by declaring that his pudgy hands were just right for holding the skeins which she wound into balls of a roundness and smoothness that fascinated the boy.

Ever since Miss Minnie had come to visit his mother, her old school friend, Tommy had constituted himself her adoring slave and his nightly petition at his mother's knee was amended to include this prayer:

"An' please God bless Miss Minnie an' save her for me 'til I c'n grow up an' marry her."

Under such circumstances, it was scarcely to be wondered that Tommy regarded with small favor Howard Kinlock, who had become a regular visitor to the Bryans' since the advent of Miss Shelby.

The sensitive Kinlock, not discerning jealousy as the cause of the boy's dislike, worried over the youngster's hostility, and curried favor in vain with sweets and toys, which the boy disdained.

The wool-winding was still in progress when Kinlock made his regular afternoon appearance, and he did not strengthen his cause with Tommy by promptly offering to relieve Tommy of his task.

"I like to do it," protested Tommy, "an' Miss Minnie says she just loves to have me hold 'em for her."

"Tommy's been having such a lovely time running around the drive," explained Miss Shelby, with a meaning glance at Kinlock. "It is very good of him to stop his play and help."

"I just offered to take his place, so he could play," apologized Kinlock, lamely. "See what I brought you, Tommy."

He held up a ball—a boy's ball instead of the soft rubber affair that he unfortunately offered the preceding week.

"Don't want it," said Tommy, resolutely, not turning around to see what the gift might be.

"That is not courteous," said Miss Shelby, gently, noting the look of disappointment that crossed Kinlock's face. "Mr. Kinlock has brought you a ball, a real ball like those the men play with, and you will not even look at it."

Dutifully Tommy turned and accepted the gift, giving thanks as a gentleman should, but not even the possession of a "league" ball brought joy to his heart, and he stood uncertainly holding it, divided between desire to try it and unwillingness to play with a gift of the enemy.

"Take it around in the side yard where it is shady," suggested Miss Shelby. "I will not wind any more yarn until evening."

"You won't let him help?" asked Tommy, pointing to the uncomfortable Kinlock.

"Not a thread," promised Miss Shelby. "We'll be around in a little while to see how well you can catch it. We want to give you a chance to practice a little."

Cheered by this explanation, Tommy kissed his idol and dutifully trotted around into the side yard, where he stuck to his practice, though the heavy ball hurt his fingers, and it made his small muscles ache to throw it into the air.

It was no more suitable than had been the soft rubber ball it had replaced, but it had been a very long time since Kinlock had been a boy. He was only 30, but he was at the age when boyhood seems far more distant than in a later day.

It was lonesome work, and Tommy was glad when at last Kinlock and Miss Shelby made their appearance. He could not show off with so heavy a ball, and when Kinlock offered to play catch, the man, unconscious of his strength, sent the balls too swiftly, and at last Tommy had to call halt for sheer pain.

Miss Shelby, with quick sympathy, took him in her arms and bore him back to the piazza. Kinlock followed contritely, bearing the ball, and as the girl rocked the child and with gentle voice soothed his ruffled spirits the man could only stare helplessly and wonder if it was true that children and dogs were unerring in their instinctive likes and dislikes.

Kinlock always got on admirably with dogs—but then he understood dogs better than he did children.

A telephone call took Miss Shelby into the house and Kinlock sought to solve the riddle.

"Why don't you like me, Tommy?" he demanded when they two were alone.

"Because you want to marry my Miss Minnie," explained Tommy, not seeking to dodge the issue.

"But you can't marry her," protested Kinlock.

"Can so," insisted Tommy. "She told me I could. Did she tell you you could?"

Kinlock made sign of negation. Miss Shelby had seemed to evade the issue, though she seemed to like him.

"She's going to wait until I grow up, then we're going to be married and have three kinds of cake and seven kinds of ice cream."

TOMMY HAD CONSTITUTED HIMSELF MISS MINNIE'S ADORING SLAVE.

"What are the seven kinds?" asked Kinlock with a laugh.

"I don't know, but we're going to have 'em. Ma said we could have 'leven kinds, but I think that seven is enough, don't you?"

"Ample," agreed Kinlock, with a laugh. "But look here, Tommy. You are only 6. It will be at least 20 years before you can get married. Think of that."

"Miss Minnie says she'll wait," declared Tommy, confidently.

"But why can't you lend me Miss Minnie in the meantime?" urged Kinlock, gravely. "I'll marry her until you get grown up, and then if you haven't seen someone else you would rather marry, why, you can marry Miss Minnie yourself and I'll find another wife somewhere."

"Of course I'll want her," insisted Tommy, with sublime faith in his constancy. "But if you want her until then, an' you'll cross your heart you'll give her back—"

"Cross my heart, hope to die," solemnly promised Kinlock, with a faint memory of the old formula. "It's a bargain."

He held out his hand and Tommy gravely placed his own tiny palm within the other's grasp.

At that moment Miss Shelby returned. "What is this solemn pact," she asked, as she stood in the doorway.

"I'm going to lend you to Mr. Kinlock until I get big enough to marry you myself," explained Tommy. "He was promising to give you back when I want you."

Miss Shelby dodged into the parlor. But Kinlock followed. Presently they appeared upon the piazza again, and Kinlock caught Tommy up and swung him to his shoulder.

"Thomas," he cried gayly, "we are going down town to buy a ring. Come with us and you shall have your pick of all the balls in the stores as first interest on the loan. Miss Minnie is willing to be loaned."

A MAGICIAN

IT WAS probable that Bertha never would have become interested in the man across the way had it not been for the flowers. Then from interest in the window her attention was turned to the young man whose pale face she saw so often amid the blooms.

Bertha had her own little window garden in the one window on the court into which the sunlight shone in the mornings, and her geranium slips grew with such rapidity that her heart took great pride in them. They had engrossed her completely until the young man across the way set out his window box and spent part of one morning placing it in position.

Bertha regarded enviously his handsome tile box. It was evidently an expensive product of the shops, while hers was but a zinc box, made for her by a tinsmith.

But when the sun had passed over to the other side of the court, and Bertha went to water her plants, she stared in amazement, for there in the other box were half a dozen lilies. They were not very tall, but it was evident that they were expensive, and Bertha felt a fine contempt for a man who had to purchase his plants already grown.

The next day a fresh surprise was prepared for her. When she looked out across the court to see if the plants would grow or had already wilted down, she saw that the lilies were twice as large as they had been before and she smiled with superiority as she realized that in all probability the original lilies had died and had been replaced by new and stronger plants.

The third day there was a third, and larger, lot with the blooms; exquisite blooms that must have cost a great deal of money. More than ever Bertha felt a contempt for a man who was dependent upon a florist.

The strange part of it was that though a gentle-faced old lady came frequently to the window to watch the blooms, she did not touch the plants, but left the work entirely to her son.

Once or twice Bertha saw the two standing at the window, and apparently laughing over the difficulty they experienced in bringing blooms to perfection, for as the days passed it was evident that there was short life for the plants in the box across the way. Not a week passed that the plants were not changed once or twice and sometimes nearly every day.

"I AM INTERESTED IN MAGIC."

Unconsciously she had become greatly interested in the young man across the way and in his attempts at floriculture, so she longed to give him the assistance that his perseverence deserved.

Had she ever met the old lady in the hall she would have spoken to her, but they used separate elevators and never encountered each other. Probably Bertha would have worried about the garden all summer had there not come the day of her shock.

She was tending her own plants when the young man came to the window accompanied by another man who glanced admiringly at the plants and leaned over, at the other's suggestion, to inhale the fragrance of the blooms.

As he did so Bertha very nearly fell out of the window in her astonishment, for the lilies vanished utterly from the box, and a very much surprised young man turned to his friend. As he did so there appeared as suddenly the half-grown plants only to vanish in turn and give away to the full blooms again.

The two men laughed and withdrew from the window and presently Bertha saw them leaving the courtyard. She slipped through the halls to the other apartment and in response to her timid ring the old lady appeared. She smiled as Bertha made her request.

"You will have to ask Ned," she said. "I don't suppose that he will object to explaining how he grows flowers, but it is his secret. I will ask him when he comes in."

NED'S AUNT.

Bertha backed away protesting in embarrassment that she had no desire to penetrate secrets, but late in the afternoon there was a ring at her own bell and she opened the door to face the old lady.

"My nephew will be only too glad to show you his plants," she said, with her gentle smile. "Will you come with me?"

Bertha was startled as she was ushered into the apartment by her conductress. It seemed like the cavern of some sorceress, with its mystic symbols and apparatus.

But the young man who came forward to greet her looked little like a wizard.

"My aunt tells me that I have roused your curiosity with my foolish tricks," he said, pleasantly, as he led her to the window. "Like most mysteries the solution is absurdly simple.

"I am interested in magic and dabble a bit at it in an amateur way. We never have had luck with flowers, and I decided that this year we should have what we wanted. It is just a magical trick. The plants are made of very thin tissue and are inflated with an air pump. There are three sets for the different sizes. I can turn the air into either set."

Bertha's face fell as she saw how easily she had been deceived, but she found the magical apartment fascinating in its surprises, and before the tricks were exhausted she had become well acquainted with the old lady and with New Tomlin as well; so well, indeed, that when, some months later, he suggested that she preside over his window garden and grow real flowers instead of pneumatic ones, the answer was entirely satisfactory to Ned.

"We'll withdraw the hot-air garden," he cried, exultingly. "I guess it's the first time anyone ever grew a wife on a plant of that sort. I grew a finer blossom than I ever dared dream of."

Friendly Criticism.

Scribbles—"What do you think of my poem in the curent issue of Blank's Magazine?"

Criticus—"It reminds me of a plate of hash."

Scribbles—"Why, how's that?"

Criticus—"It is a mysterious composition that defies investigation."